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BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

THE COMANCHE SUN DANCE AND MESSIANIC OUTBREAK OF 1873

A confirmation of the Comanche Sun Dance[1] occurs incidentally in the valuable historical work of Professor R. N. Richardson.[2] Richardson does not treat of the Sun Dance itself, but he has produced some important cultural data that deserve to be called to the attention of anthropologists.

The recent work of Spier on the Prophet Dance of the Northwest[3] has established the cultural matrix of the several messianic cults of western North America in a number of deep-lying and apparently ancient, indigenous traits. The Comanches can also be fitted into this picture.

It is an hitherto unrealized fact that the Comanches in 1873 had their own short-lived messianic outbreak. It is particularly notable that they did not use the ceremonial form of the then current Prophet Dance (with which they most likely had no direct contact). It was the Sun Dance which was adopted as the ceremonial vehicle! The Sun Dance was a wholly new feature in Comanche culture, devoid of associations which tied it too closely to other religious ends; and it possessed the elements of ritualized supernaturalism and the novel and spectacular which seem to be so important in messianic revivalism.

Richardson's fully documented account, which is derived from the official communications of observers who were in the field at the time,[4] reveals the following essential facts (corroborated at some points by the field notes taken by the Santa Fe Laboratory of Anthropology Ethnology Field Study Group, 1933):

a) "When conditions were already alarming (i.e., unrest on the Kiowa-Comanche reservation), the Comanches conceived the idea of holding a tribal medicine dance similar to the annual ceremonies of the Kiowas. This was a new thing for the Comanches."[5]

b) This idea was promulgated by the famous young medicine man and warrior, Isatai, whose prestige was based upon a number of powers. He had established his invulnerability to bullets (which was common enough), and he had "raised the dead." But more important were his successful predictions that the comet which was attracting much attention at the time would disappear within five days and that it would be followed by a summer-long drought. According to the reports, he had also "ascended above the clouds, where he had communed with the Great Spirit."[6]

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[1] Cf., R. Linton, *The Comanche Sun Dance* (American Anthropologist, Vol. 37, 1935), pp. 420–428.

[2] R. N. Richardson, *The Comanche Barrier to South Plains Settlement* (Glendale, Cal., 1933), pp. 373 ff.

[3] L. Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives* (General Series in Anthropology, No. 1, 1935).

[4] F. W. Smith and J. W. Smith to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Sept. 26, 1874, Central Superintendency, S 1328; Haworth to Beede, April 25, 1874; Haworth to Hoag, May 6, 1874.

[5] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 372. [6] *Ibid.*, p. 372.

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668 792 c) After Iʂatai had issued the call for the Sun Dance "which was widely heralded, and when the tribesmen assembled in May at a point on Red river near the agency boundary, every band was represented, several of them by almost one hundred percent of their people. . . . The great chiefs of the past had never been able to bring the scattered threads of the tribe together, but now a youthful warrior was about to accomplish that."[7]

d) The doctrine which Iʂatai preached was as follows:

a') The Caddoes, Wichitas and other tribes which had settled into reservation life were "going down hill fast" in numbers and well-being.

b') This was the fate in store for the Comanches if they heeded to the demands of the government.

c') But if they would turn to the war path and annihilate the Whites, then they would again become powerful and prosperous.

d') With his supernatural power he was empowered to cover all the warriors with immunity to bullets, and so he could guarantee the success of the venture against the Whites.[8]

619 e) Because of the violent tenor which the councils took, the pénəteka (Swift Stingers) band of Texas Comanches and a few other smaller groups withdrew and departed for home.

668 792 726 f) When the Sun Dance was finished he led a great war party of Comanches, accompanied by some Kiowas and Southern Cheyenes, south into Texas to wipe out the buffalo hunters who had their headquarters at Adobe Walls. There they came up against the new large caliber, long-range buffalo guns with which the professional buffalo hunters were equipped. The effect was disconcerting and disastrous. Iʂatai was discredited, and though he did not receive the horse-whipping that some of the warriors threatened, his influence as a prophet and leader was ended.[9]

g) But the fire Iʂatai had set was not yet burned out. Throughout that summer and the next year scores of murderous attacks were made upon white travelers and settlements throughout the southern plains. The result was to provoke determined military action and the abandonment of the Quaker Policy in Indian Affairs on the part of the United States. By 1875 the Comanches were militarily crushed, and that year "marks the end of their influence as a frontier factor of significance."[10]

So ended the Comanche experience with militant messianism in 1873–74.

668 171 In conclusion, attention may be called to the significance of these data for the question of North American prophet cults. Wallis[11] has summarized the materials which demonstrate a general and long-standing tendency to messianic attempts in this part of the aboriginal world. Spier, in proving the roots of the Ghost Dance in the Prophet Dance complex of the northwestern tribes, has laid stress upon the indigenous nature of regeneration of the dead in the cultures of that area.[12] The

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 374. [8] Hoebel, *Comanche Field Notes*, unpublished.

[9] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 376. Also, Hoebel, *Comanche Field Notes*.

[10] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

[11] W. D. Wallis, *Messiahs: Christian and Pagan* (Boston, 1918), Chap. V.

[12] Spier, *op. cit., in toto.*